



## Middle School Improvement Plan For Students with Autism

### **I. Introduction**

The Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools (CHCCS) provide educational services for a growing number of students with autism. Since 1994, services at the elementary school level for students with autism have been continuously improving. Also, self-contained classes have been added at the middle and high school levels. The continuum of services was successfully expanded at the elementary level with the later provision of autism resource teachers at the Ephesus Road and Frank Porter Graham Elementary Schools. Now, significant improvements are required in middle school services for children with autism, particularly in two key areas:

1. A range of support services needs to be replicated in alignment with the elementary school models for fully-included and partially-included students with autism so that they succeed in the regular education academic curriculum;
2. Substantial improvements are needed in the services to students with autism in self-contained settings.

These changes are necessary to ensure appropriate educations for these children, and to enhance learning, testing performance and educational outcomes for these students. Such changes need to be implemented in a framework that ensures the safety of students with autism at all times.

This document has been prepared by the Chapel Hill Area Local Unit (CHALU) of the Autism Society of North Carolina, an organization of parents and professionals who provide support and advocacy for persons with autism. The next section provides background on autism. The section following discusses key concerns in middle school services for students with autism: support, academic issues, social skills training, safe schools, and crisis management. Specific recommendations are presented for each area of concern. The final section summarizes our recommendations for improving services for middle school students with autism, and adds suggestions on monitoring implementation of those services.

## II. Background

**Although individuals with autism may vary greatly from each other, all share a common cluster of underlying educational challenges.** Regardless of their autistic level of functioning, each has difficulties in:

- **Understanding how information from our social environment is used to learn;**
- **Processing verbal, non-verbal and written language;**
- **Expanding their range of interests to increase their learning abilities; and**
- **Organizing and relating information in a relevant manner.**

It is important to understand that autism is a neurologically-based spectrum disorder, meaning there will be various levels of impairment in the above noted areas of functioning. For example, in relation to communication, one student with autism will be able to communicate using pictures, others by simple words or sentences, while others will be over-talkative, with little understanding of how their communicating is interfering with learning essential information.

Within CHCCS, some students with autism are fully- or partially-included, spending all or a vast majority of their day in regular education, and participating fully in the general education curriculum. Their Individualized Educational Plans (IEP's) typically follow the North Carolina Standard Course of study, but may call for them to receive some "pullout" or collaborative resource support or speech therapy during the day/week. Other students with autism require a largely self-contained classroom to receive an appropriate education. Their IEP's may call for mainstreaming in the regular educational environment for brief periods, usually for specials like music or physical education, for areas of strength (e.g. math), and/or for social times like recess and fieldtrips.

In brief, autism is a neurologically-based disorder, with each student requiring skilled teaching wherever he/she falls on the spectrum. It is essential that an appropriate support structure and enriched learning environment be provided by well-trained staff that both understand these students' learning needs and can also assist fellow staff members in working with them.

### III. Specific Areas of Concern

This section discusses key areas of concern in the middle school services for students with autism: support, academic issues, social skills training, safety, and crisis intervention. For each area, discussion of current status and concerns is followed by recommendations for improvement.

#### A. Support for Fully- and Partially-Included Students with Autism

##### 1. Current status

In 1995, the CHCCS Board adopted the Challenge of Inclusion prepared February 1. Subsequently, two district elementary schools, Ephesus and Frank Porter Graham, have created a structure to support fully- and partially-included students with autism. The key element of this structure is an Autism Services Teacher, who provides direct services to students with autism on a regularly-scheduled basis, and also provides training and support to faculty, staff, and typical students who interact with students with autism. The teacher has special training in autism and dedicated classroom space in which to provide services. Significant progress resulting from this new philosophy and structure has led to both an increase in the number of included students, and in those students' success. Many of these included students are now attending or will soon be progressing to the middle school level.

Until just recently, included students with autism in middle school have been receiving support from one K-12 itinerant autism teacher traveling between all the district schools (except Ephesus and Frank Porter Graham). This past August, an itinerant autism teacher was added to focus on services for the four middle schools and the two high schools in our school district.

##### 2. Concerns

While a very valuable resource and consultant for some included students with autism and their teachers, an itinerant autism teacher has difficulty:

- a. Addressing problem behaviors and/or crisis situations as they occur;
- b. Being perceived as a resource for support or training by middle school faculty and staff;
- c. Monitoring implementation of her recommendations;
- d. Teaching collaboratively, a practice that would enrich the learning of the student with autism, increase that student's acceptance by non-disabled peers, and possibly provide more opportunities for some self-contained students to be mainstreamed.

### 3. Recommendations

CHALU proposes that CHCCS replicate the success of the elementary programs in at least two middle schools, which provide a supportive environment for included students with autism. This structure includes an **Autism Services Teacher, an Autism Services Assistant, and dedicated classroom space.**

- a. The **Autism Services Teacher** will be a full-time faculty member of a particular middle school, credentialed in exceptional education with additional training in autism. This teacher will:
  1. Provide direct services to included students with autism;
  2. Support and train faculty and staff, regarding autism (general) and also specific individuals (as applicable);
  3. Provide peer training and coaching;
  4. Support other resource teachers and serve as a consultant to teachers in self contained classrooms;
  5. Encourage modifications and provide support so self-contained students may also have more opportunity for mainstreaming;
  6. Provide services as needed to students with other learning disabilities that respond to the methods used for students with autism;
  7. Enhance communication between home and school;
  8. Teach coping skills and stress management;
  9. Ensure that transition planning into and out of middle school occurs in an organized and timely manner; and
  10. Collaborate with extended school year programs.
  
- b. The **Autism Services Assistant** serves as a valuable safety net and educational resource for included students with autism, especially since regular education middle school teachers do not have dedicated assistants like the primary elementary school teachers have. Under guidance and training by the Autism Services Teacher, this Autism Services Assistant will:
  1. Provide direct services to students with autism;
  2. Supervise students in the autism resource room when the teacher is away from the classroom;
  3. Accompany included students to certain classes to facilitate instruction and direct behavior;
  4. Assist students with organization while the autism services teacher is leading a lesson; and
  5. Flexibly adapt to changing job duties as directed by the Autism Services Teacher, due to the varying needs of the included students with autism.

- c. The **Autism Services dedicated classroom** is NOT intended to be a self-contained classroom for the Autism Services Teacher. Instead this room is to function as:
1. A 'Learning Lab' for training in social skills, organizational skills, and small group work that are so challenging for students with this disability;
  2. A 'Sensory Break Room' to be used by students requiring time away from the mainstream environment;
  3. A place for the Autism Services Teacher to work directly with a student with autism, a group of students with autism, or students with autism and peer-buddies as needed to implement the IEP goals; and
  4. A place for Homeroom to assist included students with autism in organization and planning tasks.
- d. **Projected benefits** of implementing this program at the middle school level include:
1. Reduction in the number of behavioral problems leading to referrals to the office and disciplinary actions. It is well recognized that these children need more direct assistance and support than their typical peers to manage the physical, emotional, and mental health changes that accompany puberty.
  2. Improved service coordination to implement IEP goals through ongoing training and support to regular education staff serving included students with autism.
  3. Enhanced academic success, which is critical in reducing the achievement gap in state testing by the "exceptional children's services" demographic now being monitored by the "No Child Left Behind" Federal legislation.
  4. Improved communications between home and school. While it is typical for this age group to be less reliable communicating between home and school, our children's communication deficits greatly exacerbate the problem. An on-site Autism Service Teacher can support effective communication between home and the middle schoolers' increased number of teachers plus these teachers' various communication methods.
- e. Initially, this program will not necessarily be available at the neighborhood middle school of an included student with autism. Therefore, the ability to transfer to another middle school that **has** a program with an Autism Services Teacher should be an option that can be considered by a student's IEP team.
- f. To ensure long-term success for included students with autism, CHALU advocates for the program to eventually be replicated in more middle schools and each high school.

## **B. Academic Issues for Students with Autism in Self-Contained Classrooms**

### 1. Current status

After several years of effectively providing services as recommended by CHALU in 1994 to the Board, we now need to improve and enrich our middle school self-contained classrooms. In order to continue to build upon the gains our children have made in elementary school and fulfill the Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools mission statement to enable all students to acquire the knowledge, skills, and insights necessary to live rewarding, productive lives in our changing society, we ask that services be improved in the following four areas: enriched curriculum; social opportunities; vocational training; and extended school year.

#### a. *Enriched Curriculum*

Participation in the general curriculum is a stated goal and legal right for all students. This curriculum includes Art, Music, Physical Education and other courses. In addition, CHCCS' Strategic Plan has a curriculum strategy to "provide/assure a broad exposure to and/or experience with the arts for all learners."

Our students with autism in self-contained classrooms are not offered as many opportunities to participate in the general curriculum as their regular education peers. These students are not currently offered Art or appropriate Physical Education. A weekly session of music therapy has only been added since September 2002 to the self-contained class, which is a positive improvement. A wealth of research documents the effectiveness of these activities in decreasing boredom, enhancing learning, calming agitation, and providing opportunities for skill generalization. In addition, the arts can be adapted, organized, and structured in ways to ensure participation at all levels of ability.

#### b. *Social Skills and Leisure Education*

Another goal of the current Strategic plan is for CHCCS to "ensure that all students acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes and habits necessary to build productive, healthy and fulfilling lives and to become life-long learners, complementing the roles of other community groups and the central role of the family..."

Some children with autism in self-contained classrooms could be included in the mainstream for part of the day/week. Currently, they seem to miss out on these opportunities to practice their social skills outside the classroom.

In addition, our middle school children with autism lack quality leisure skills training programs. When students with autism aren't engaged in a structured activity, they frequently don't know what to do and then engage in increased stereotypical behaviors, self-stimulation, and other negative behaviors. They require direct instruction in leisure activities that are meaningful to them.

Developing these skills is needed to promote a healthy, productive and fulfilling lifestyle.

c. *Vocational Training*

Vocational training and assessment needs to be improved at the middle school level. To prevent boredom and subsequent behavior problems, middle school vocational programming needs to offer different activities than the high school vocational programming. However, there should be some vertical alignment between the middle school and high school vocational training to foster progression of skill development.

d. *Extended School Year*

Extended School Year (ESY) program provides the critical service to prevent regression for our children with autism. Concerns about the current ESY program for middle school students with autism include:

- 1) Lack of a certified teacher for the past two summers;
- 2) ESY staff often lack training about autism, and information about how to work with each ESY student's individual program and behaviors; and
- 3) Program length set at five weeks is too short to prevent many students from regressing.

2. Recommendations and Projected Benefits

Middle school students with autism in self-contained classrooms need an enriched curriculum which addresses their strengths and weaknesses in the social, arts, vocational, academic, leisure, self-help and communication skill areas. CHALU proposes a number of recommendations to improve middle school services for self-contained students with autism. In this section, potential benefits are listed along with the suggested changes. (Note that the following curriculum improvements would also vastly benefit students with autism at the high school level as well.)

a. *Increased exposure to the arts:*

- 1) Students to participate weekly in appropriately-adapted **music** class with a music instructor;
- 2) Students to participate weekly in appropriately-adapted **art** class with an art instructor;
- 3) Students to participate weekly in a **dance** class with a teacher who can integrate music with imitation skills, physical activity and social interaction with peers. This could be patterned after dance instruction given by L.D. Burris at Ephesus.

Participation in the fine arts can:

- 1) Increase potential for learning because of the opportunity to integrate these activities with IEP goals;
  - 2) Support emotional development;
  - 3) Enhance and generalize fine and gross motor skills;
  - 4) Encourage verbal and non-verbal communication;
  - 5) Lead to increased motivation at school;
  - 6) Improve self-esteem.
- b. *Increased appropriate physical education (PE) services.* Students to receive direct adapted PE services a MINIMUM of two days each week, and regular PE the other days of the week with consultation from the adapted PE instructor.

Projected benefits of enhanced PE services include:

- 1) Physical conditioning for life-long health, including prevention of obesity and related problems;
  - 2) Improved mood and decreased aggression;
  - 3) Reduced medication dosages, and consequently fewer side effects; and
  - 4) Improved skills essential for participation in life-long leisure activities.
- c. *Quality leisure and time management education.* This program should include:
- 1) Identification of recreational and leisure time interests, and subsequent skills instruction;
  - 2) Integration of speech therapy and occupational therapy, using a co-treatment model, with development of leisure skills (e.g. cooking and gardening);
  - 3) Appropriate facilities, including fenced recess equipment; and
  - 4) Sensory integration training for occupational therapists.

Projected benefits include:

- 1) Increased opportunities for social interaction with typical students;
  - 2) Decreased stereotypical behavior, self-stimulation and other negative behaviors; and
  - 3) Improved quality of life.
- d. *Supported Mainstreaming-* Our children with autism in self-contained classrooms need opportunities to participate in all aspects of school life, with appropriate support. ([Incorporating Social Goals into the Classroom](#) by Rebecca A. Moyes is an excellent resource.) To help accomplish this, CHALU recommends:
- 1) Developing a Peer Volunteer program that includes a peer-training component. Peers may volunteer in the self-contained classrooms and as buddies/coaches, with students mainstreaming into classes such as art, keyboarding, PE, clusters and lunch.

- 2) Identifying and training typical students to serve as student assistants to teachers. McDougle already has produced an informational video to recruit students for such a program. Interested students could be sent in pairs to provide assistance for a given period.
- 3) Providing basic and ongoing training about autism to ALL faculty to build a foundation for successful mainstreaming with adequate supports. Perhaps, incentives (e.g. smaller class size) could be considered for teachers who have mainstreaming students as part of their load.
- 4) Reviewing all curricular and extracurricular activities to identify additional opportunities for inclusion of students with disabilities.

Projected benefits include:

- 1) Increased participation by children with autism in more aspects of school life;
- 2) Expanded least restricted environment (as legally-required) for learning;
- 3) Increased opportunities to generalize social skills across settings;
- 4) Development of meaningful relationships between children with autism and their typical peers; and
- 5) Further development of positive character traits, such as respect for differences among people and an appreciation of diversity, in all students.

e. *Enriched Community Based Instruction*- Recommended activities are provided in Attachment A. Such activities are needed so students can practice classroom lessons in the community.

f. *Vocational Programming*- Vocational training and assessment should begin at the middle school level, especially for students in self-contained settings. The vocational possibilities for students with autism shall not be limited by either preconceived limitations or existing vocational programs. The individual interests and abilities of each student with autism shall be considered in planning and preparing a vocational program. Specific recommendations are:

1. Transition plans shall be included in all Individualized Education Plans by age 14, with the intent of making the individual as self-sufficient and independent as possible. Parents should be given information on the four high school pathways of study by the transition to middle school.
2. When vocational training and assessment commences for middle school, evaluators should have both training and experience. A standardized assessment tool needs to be used, and results recorded.
3. In-school vocational programs must be developed and expanded. Programs need to offer opportunities to practice skills in the community setting.
4. Middle school and high school teachers need to collaborate on vocational program planning. For example, the high school vocational program should offer different activities from the middle school vocational program. Yet, there needs to be some vertical alignment to build on the students' already-emerging skills.

This collaboration should also help prevent boredom and subsequent behavior problems.

g. *Extended School Year (ESY) Services.* Recommended changes are:

1. Recruit and retain certified teachers for the ESY classrooms;
2. Train ESY staff about autism, and provide information about how to work with each ESY student's individual programs and behaviors;
3. Focus ESY instruction on IEP goals;
4. Increase the ESY program length to prevent skill regression; and
5. Review the Community Schools Summer Enrichment program to see if current half-day camps could be adapted for students with autism (with aides). Also, design new classes to better serve the needs of these students.

## C. **Social Skills Training**

### 1. Concerns

Difficulties in social functioning are core deficits of autism across the spectrum. Lack of social skills often prevents adults with autism from functioning in society as independently as possible, which is the primary mission of special education.

Unlike their peers, middle school students with autism cannot be expected to improve their social skills by merely being in proximity to regular education students. For students with autism, acquiring social competence is labor intensive, requiring direct instruction and practice of specific skills in a non-stressful environment. Subsequent opportunities to practice these skills in the mainstream environments are required.

In middle school, impairments in social skills, communication, and organizational abilities interfere with the ability of a student with autism to ask for help, and to fit in with peers. Peer rejection can lead to isolation, feelings of failure, and depression.

### 2. Recommendations

#### a. Adopt an **autism-appropriate social skills curriculum**, which:

- 1) Includes individual assessment of needs and skills;
- 2) Provides direct instruction of key skills in the autism services or self-contained classroom;
- 3) Is taught by the Autism Services (included students) or autism self-contained classroom teacher, and reinforced by others such as speech teachers, counselors, and family specialists; and
- 4) Provides opportunities for practice in increasingly-complex social settings.

#### b. Develop a **Peer-buddy/teacher assistant** program, which:

- 1) Carefully identifies, recruits and trains non-disabled peers to partner with students with autism in the lunchroom, on fieldtrips, etc.;
- 2) Includes training and coaching by the Autism Services teacher; and
- 3) Simultaneously provides service learning opportunities for typical students, and social skills practice for students with autism.

#### c. Projected benefits include:

- 1) Improved capacity of students with autism to successfully function in society;
- 2) Development of desired character traits and responsible behavior in both typical students and students with autism; and
- 3) Decreased disruptive and inappropriate behaviors due to social misunderstanding.

## **D. Safe Schools**

### 1. Concerns

Students with autism have difficulty understanding and responding to social situations, making them particularly vulnerable to bullying in the school environment. Compared to the elementary school environment, a middle school is less safe and nurturing. Within the school district there have been examples of assaults and harassment of middle school students with autism.

### 2. Recommendations

To prevent bullying and the accompanying safety issues, CHALU offers the following recommendations:

- a. *Build bullying-prevention and safety measures into programs, through:*
  - 1) Individualized structure;
  - 2) Ongoing social skills training to help students interpret others' verbal and nonverbal communications, and then respond appropriately;
  - 3) Established safe areas and staff students can go to when a problem arises;
  - 4) Communication systems, providing visual reminders of what to do;
  - 5) Appropriate individual behavior plans;
  - 6) Availability of counseling by staff trained in autism; and
  - 7) Expanding the continuum of more supportive placement options by adding an autism services teacher.
- b. *Eliminate the classroom model that combines students with behavioral and emotional disabilities and students with autism.*
- c. *Provide trained personnel to actively supervise students with autism in situations that are typically 'high risk' for bullying and harassment, such as:*  
before and after school, lunch, PE locker room, field trips, bathrooms, hallways between classes.
- d. *Reinforce and improve protocols for safe behavior management:*
  - 1) Staff working with students with autism exhibiting challenging behaviors must be adequately trained, supervised and supported; and
  - 2) Protocol for convening on a regular, as well as on an as-needed basis, the Exceptional Children's Advisory Committee to address compliance and improvements in these areas is needed.

## **E. Crisis Services**

Crisis prevention and stabilization with consistent, documented policies and procedural methods do not exist and are desperately needed. This is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is **urgent** that a strategic committee with experienced parents and professionals in the field of crisis management and developmental disabilities be convened to address these issues.

## **IV. Conclusion**

The Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools have been providing educational services for a growing number of students with autism. This paper has discussed CHALU's key concerns about middle school services for students with autism: support, academic issues, social skills training, safety and crisis management.

As part of our commitment to collaborate with CHCCS, to ensure progress of the program improvements and to offer ongoing suggestions and support, CHALU will appoint two of its parent members to serve on the Exceptional Children's Advisory Committee. CHALU looks forward to working with the Board of Education, Exceptional Education administrators and faculty to support implementation of the recommendations in this document.

[Jamezetta Bedford](#)

[Lisa Danker](#)

[Darragh Davis](#)

[Katherine Eden](#)

[Sara Gage](#)

[Colleen Gajewski](#)

[Tricia Han](#)

[Lorraine LaPointe](#)

[Lori Slack](#)